

cepting the polar and subpolar seas, and is suspected to be relatively uncommon (Baker 1983). Outside of Australia, strandings have been recorded from the United States, South Africa, India, Sri Lanka, Japan and Hawaii (Watson, 1981). This is the first recorded stranding of a Dwarf Sperm Whale in the Northern Territory. The National Cetacean Strandings Database (Environment Australia) records only 3 other strandings of this species in Australia, all from the southern states.

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### References

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## **Whale strandings in the Northern Territory III. A mass stranding of Melon-headed Whales *Peponocephala electra* on Elcho Island**

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During March 1996, JJ observed 40 small whales progressively beach themselves in a small bay on the north-east tip of Elcho Island, Northern Territory (11°45'S 135°54'E). Between March 21 and March 26 a group of at least 200 whales was observed to be active in the area. Whales started to come ashore as the tide began to drop at c. 12 noon on 21 March. By the end of the first day 6 or 7 whales had stranded and a few more stranded each day until 26 March. The whales would come close to shore with the high tide when some would apparently deliberately beach themselves. The other animals would move back out with the dropping tide but remain nearby, repeating the procedure on the next high tide. The whales that had not stranded left the area by

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**Plate 1.** Melon-headed Whales stranded on Elcho Island. (Photo: John Jacobson)

the 26 March. A similar group of whales was seen in the vicinity on 30 March and 4 April but no more strandings occurred.

The whales stranded over a distance of c. 0.5 km on both the rocky and sandy shore of the bay. The site is adjacent to the strait separating Elcho Island from the chain of smaller islands to the north-east. While tidal flows in this strait can be rapid, the small bay is protected by a point and is generally calm. No fishing boats were in the area at the time and the weather was not rough.

Measurements, teeth counts and photographs sent to RC suggested the majority (if not all) of the stranded whales were Melon-headed Whales *Peponocephala electra*.